

# ch enjoys Final Four ride — from distance

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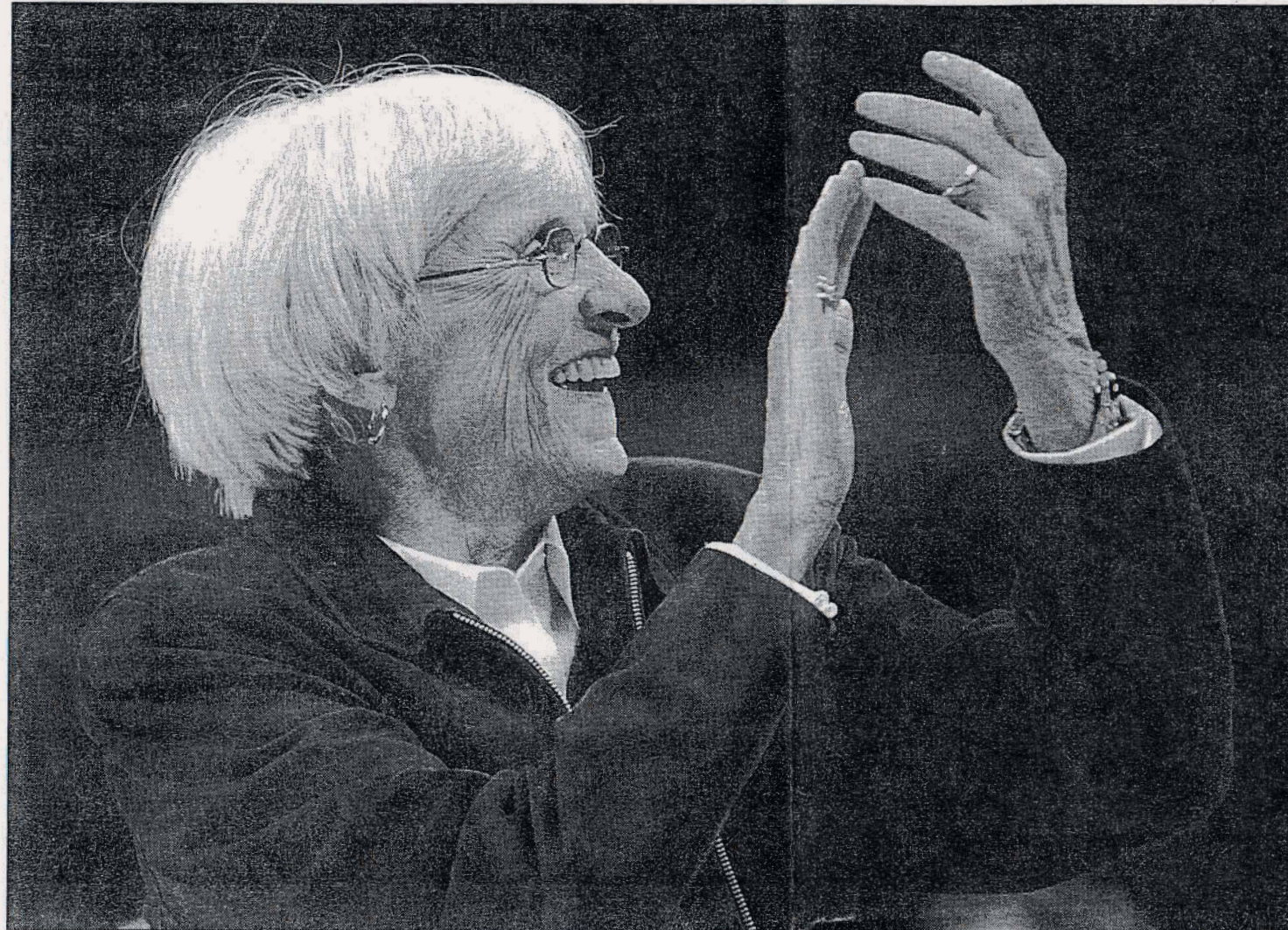
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By Dave Martin, AP

**Not quite the same:** LSU coach Sue Gunter, who's been watching games from home, says she wishes she could be there to "smell the sweat."

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just three months after LSU's football team won the Bowl Championship Series title game in the Nokia Sugar Bowl, the Lady Tigers also hope to strike it big in New Orleans starting Sunday.

"Let's go win a national championship," Gunter said Tuesday. "This thing's not over yet."

Gunter, the 2000 Women's Basketball Hall of Fame inductee and third-winningest active coach, has been sidelined from game coaching by acute bronchitis since Feb. 19. Gunter, 62, has attended practices and consulted constantly with Chatman and her two other assistants, Bob Starkey and Carla Berry.

Gunter watched the Georgia game from her living room. She said she yelled at her TV, "just like I would do if I were on the bench sitting between Bobby and Pokey."

"When the game was over and the clock ran out, I just sat there. I was by myself and just sat there and stared at the screen for like five minutes. All of a sudden all those times we got so close and couldn't pull it off ... all those things came flooding back to my mind.

"I guess I was so totally thrilled for everybody that's ever put on an LSU uniform. I felt like it was a win for our program, the whole thing."

Gunter, in her 22nd year at LSU, is 708-307 overall and 442-220 at LSU. She's still listed as LSU's head

coach and is credited with all the victories this season.

But talk about snakebit: The NCAA doesn't recognize her victories as head coach at Middle Tennessee State in the mid-1960s, which slowed her from breaking the 700-win mark; she was the head coach for the U.S. Olympic team in 1980 but didn't compete because of the boycott; and now she can't be on the floor for her program's greatest moment.

She will go to New Orleans but won't be at the games.

"It's good stuff, and I'm a part of it," Gunter said. "I don't know why things happen the way they do, but there's a reason. But I do know one thing: LSU is going to the Final Four this weekend, and that's a definite and that's the positive we look at."

"I won't be sitting on the bench, but that's still our program."

It's a far cry from the early season, when LSU (27-7) was still trying to recover from losing three players in the first two rounds of last year's WNBA draft and from starting 1-2, including an 83-46 shredding at Penn State.

Things turned around on the court, but throughout January, Gunter's health became a focus. Realizing she couldn't keep up and not wanting to take away from the team, Gunter took her doctor's advice and put Chatman in charge.

"But it probably means more to

me to get to this Final Four because of Coach Gunter," Chatman said.

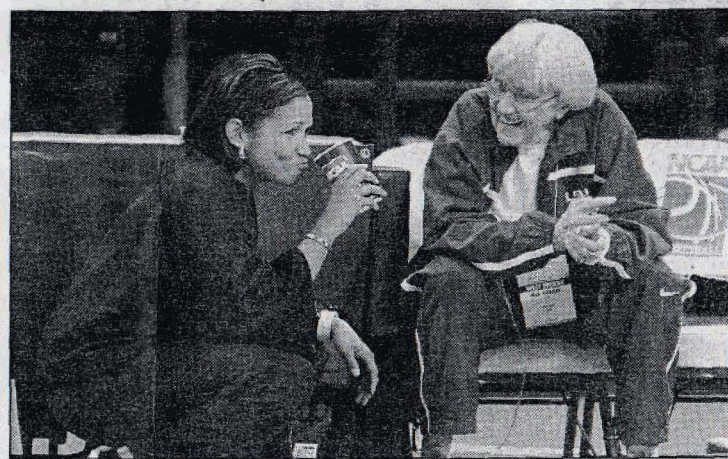
Gunter has been so close before, losing three times in regional finals. But she has said she did not need a Final Four to validate her career.

"I feel every bit a part of it, but you wanted to be (at the regional final)," Gunter said. "You wanted to actually be there. That part I missed. But I understood why I couldn't be there. I had no choice. But you want to be there and smell the sweat. But I feel very much a part of it, because it's our program and something we've worked long and hard for."

The team's star, sophomore Seimone Augustus, had great praise for LSU's assistant coaches. "They've done a terrific job keeping the thing together," said Augustus. "We could easily have broken down when Coach Gunter couldn't come back."

Billie Moore, another Hall of Famer and head coach of the 1976 Olympic team on which Gunter was an assistant, said she wasn't surprised at how Gunter handled her situation.

"She has always been secure and confident with who she is," Moore said. "She surrounds herself with good people and lets them help her. She is not an I-thing person. There is no 'I' in her, which is unusual because in this profession



By Bill Feig, AP

**Soaking up some knowledge:** Dana Chatman, left, who's been filling in for Gunter, chats with the head coach during a practice.

ego is a big thing."

None of that is lost on Starkey, a former assistant to Dale Brown who left the LSU men's program six years ago to join Gunter's staff.

"The Final Four. Six years and three Elite Eights. It's been a great run," said Starkey. "I think it's just as important for the staff to understand their roles as it is for the team. I'm very, very pleased with the role that I have. I just enjoy it, and Pokey is extremely gifted. She's an excellent communicator, whether it's recruits, players, media. She's the best I've ever worked with."

Accordingly, Chatman is now considered a rising star in the coaching ranks. At 34, she certainly appears ready to be a head coach, but Gunter has promised to return next season. Chatman seems prepared to remain her assistant if that's what happens.

"The most important thing is getting to Sunday and preparing this team and the program," Chatman said. "This is the first time for us, and we want to make sure we do it right. The kids deserve it, LSU deserves it and the community, which has gotten behind us so much, deserves it."